

Exploring Sustainable Tourism Research Trends: A Literature Review of the Last Decade

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Abstract: Sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical focus in contemporary discussions surrounding environmental conservation and social responsibility. As global tourism continues to expand, the need for sustainable practices becomes increasingly urgent to mitigate adverse impacts on natural ecosystems and support local communities. This article presents a systematic literature review dedicated to exploring the key research trends in sustainable tourism from 2015 to 2024. The review aims to synthesize existing knowledge and highlight the importance of sustainability in the tourism sector. Data for this review was collected from the Scopus database, utilizing the keywords "sustain* tourism". This search yielded a total of 620 articles, reflecting a robust body of research in this vital area. A thematic evolution analysis was subsequently conducted to map the most prominent research areas and uncover existing gaps and opportunities for future inquiry. By focusing on the evolution of themes within the field, this study provides insights into both current and emerging topics relevant to sustainable tourism. Findings show that, the themes in sustainable tourism research have shown both divergence and convergence over time. From 2015–2019, "sustainable tourism" split into "sustainable tourism," "governance," and "development" by 2020–2022, with the latter two peaking during this period. Simultaneously, topics like "community participation," "place attachment," and others converged into "sustainable tourism." By 2023–2024, research trends displayed greater specificity. The findings from this literature review are importance to various stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, businesses, and governmental agencies. By offering a thorough perspective on sustainable tourism research, the review aims to facilitate informed decision-making processes and foster the development of more effective strategies that address sustainability challenges within the tourism industry. Furthermore, this article serves as a vital resource for guiding future research endeavours and practical applications aimed at resolving the complex issues associated with sustainability in tourism. Ultimately, the emphasis on sustainable tourism practices not only contributes to the conservation of natural and cultural resources but also ensures the well-being of local communities and the overall health of tourist destinations. By fostering collaborative efforts, this review underscores the importance of integrating sustainability into the core of tourism development strategies for a more equitable and sustainable future.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Literature review, Research trends, Thematic analysis, Sustainability strategies

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is an increasingly relevant theme in the global context, particularly in sectors with significant impacts, such as tourism. According to Hall (2019), sustainable tourism is a central concern for policymakers, marketing organizations, and researchers in the field. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) recognizes this importance by promoting sustainable tourism as a means to integrate ethics, social responsibility, and economic development. In 2017, the United Nations declared the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, highlighting the global commitment to sustainability. However, despite decades of discussion on the subject, data suggests that tourism is becoming less sustainable on a global scale (Scott et al., 2016).

Global tourism has experienced exponential growth over the past few decades, reaching 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals in 2019, with projections of 1.8 billion by 2030 (World Tourism Organization, 2021). This growth, while economically beneficial, raises concerns about its sustainability. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets clear objectives (SDGs) to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all, and tourism must align with these goals (Hall, 2019). However, the relentless pursuit of economic growth in tourism often conflicts with ecological and social limits.

For this article, we adopted the definition proposed by Mallick et al. (2020), where sustainable tourism is understood as tourism that positively impacts the environment, the community and local economies. It aims to find a balance between the needs of people (including locals and visitors) and places (encompassing the natural and social environment) (Landorf, 2009).

Negative reactions in destinations such as Barcelona, Venice, and Iceland reveal a growing discontent with mass tourism, leading to a questioning of what constitutes "success" in the sector (Hall, 2019). The pressure on

local resources and communities has resulted in increased conflicts and the need to reevaluate tourism management strategies.

Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argues that tourism must be understood and managed within a broader context of sustainability. Critically, the author states that the continuous growth of tourism, promoted by authorities and organizations, ignores the ecological limits of a finite planet, making a transition to a sufficiency approach in tourism essential—where the focus is not solely on increasing demand but also on promoting social well-being and environmental protection. This approach reinforces the need to rethink what "sustainability" means in the context of tourism, highlighting the necessity for a balance between economic and social interests.

Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) contends that the classical definition of sustainable development—"satisfying the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987)—should guide practices in tourism.

According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023), one of the main challenges faced in the sustainable tourism sector is the lack of consensus on appropriate indicators to measure sustainability. Effective governance is crucial for implementing the dimensions of sustainable tourism, which include economic development, social inclusion, and environmental protection (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). On the other hand, tourists should be considered important stakeholders, as their experiences and feedback can provide insights to enhance visitor behaviour and decision-making in sustainable tourism.

The literature emphasizes the need for a systematic and well-monitored approach to sustainable tourism that utilizes clear and robust indicators (Hall, 2008; Torres-Delgado & Palomeque, 2014). The lack of practical tools and the overload of available options can hinder real progress toward more sustainable tourism (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2015). The challenges faced by sustainable tourism are not only technical but also sociocultural. According to Eslami et al. (2019), community attachment and the perceived impacts of tourism are directly related to quality of life and support for sustainable tourism development. This underscores the importance of local community participation in decision-making to ensure that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed and that negative impacts are mitigated (Eslami et al., 2019). There are various types of tourism; for example, Industrial Tourism can educate and motivate the public on a specific theme (Pavlaković et al., 2021) while also demonstrating environmental integrity and a green attitude (Ruban et al., 2019; McBoyle, 1996; Rudd and Davis, 1998). Agyeiwaah et al. (2017) suggest that sustainable tourism should be viewed as a "journey" of small steps, where progress is often slow and nonlinear, requiring collaboration among all stakeholders, including tourists, residents, and managers, to create viable solutions.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a thematic evolution analysis of the field, following a systematic five-step process to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected sample. The steps are detailed as follows: In Step 1, we selected the Scopus database to identify the sample and define the scope of the study. We selected Scopus, a leading bibliographic database (Niñerola et al., 2019) managed by Elsevier (Liu, 2013), due to its significance and comprehensive academic coverage. The search was conducted on October 4, 2024, covering the period from 2015 to 2024. The search was performed based on article titles, following the approach of (Niñerola et al., 2019), as the primary effort was to specifically identify studies focused on sustainable tourism, ensuring a more targeted and relevant selection of articles. In Step 2, we conducted a keyword search using the term "sustain* tourism," which initially yielded 2,043 publications. In Step 3, we applied exclusion criteria to focus only on articles and reviews, which reduced the sample to 1,319 documents, excluding 724 publications. In Step 4, we limited the analysis to articles written in English, further narrowing the sample to 1,259 documents, with 535 publications excluded. In Step 5, we filtered the results by selecting the relevant Scopus categories, specifically Business, Management, and Accounting, due to their cohesiveness, interdisciplinarity, and thematic diversity. These categories form a dome encompassing various subdisciplines, enabling the establishment of links with adjacent fields (Santos & Mayoral, 2020). This step resulted in a final sample of 620 articles, following the exclusion of 639 documents, Figure 1. These five steps ensured the selection of a robust and relevant sample for analyzing the thematic evolution within the field of sustainable tourism.

Table 1: Overview of the methodological steps involved in the study

Steps	Exclusion criteria	Number of publications
Step 1	Select database: Scopus	-
	Search date: October, 4 2024 (2015 -2024)	-
	Search performed by: article title	-
Step 2	Search Keywords:	-
	"sustain* tourism"	2 043
Step 3	Documents types: articles and reviews articles	1319 (724 excluded)
Step 4	Articles written in English	1259 (535 excluded)
Step 5	Scopus Categories: Business, Management and Accounting	620 (639 excluded)
Articles for analyses - 620		

For our analysis, we used the Bibliometrix software, which offers a comprehensive set of techniques and is accessible to researchers via the Biblioshiny interface (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020).

3. Results and Discussion

Our sample provides key bibliometric indicators for the period spanning from 2015 to 2024. A total of 620 documents were identified, sourced from 153 different publications, with an annual growth rate of 10.72%, indicating a consistent increase in research output over time. The dataset includes contributions from 1,615 authors, of which 92 are single-authored publications. The average number of co-authors per document is 2.95. In terms of keywords, 1,905 distinct author keywords were used across the documents, reflecting the diversity of topics within the research field. The references cited amount to 34,097, highlighting the body of prior work that the analysed documents build upon. The average age of the documents is 3.75 years, indicating that the dataset comprises relatively recent publications. Finally, the average number of citations per document is 23.28, suggesting that the articles included in this analysis are well-cited and influential within their field.

3.1 Annual Scientific Production

The annual scientific production from 2015 to 2024 demonstrates a consistent upward trend, starting with 34 articles in 2015 and gradually increasing to 41 in 2016, 55 in 2017, 57 in 2018, and 58 in 2019. A notable rise occurred in 2020 with 65 publications, followed by a slight decrease to 60 in 2021, before reaching 66 articles in 2022. The most significant growth occurred in 2023 with 99 articles, and while there was a slight decline to 85 articles in 2024, the overall production across the decade amounted to 620 publications, highlighting the expanding interest and research activity within the field, Figure 1.

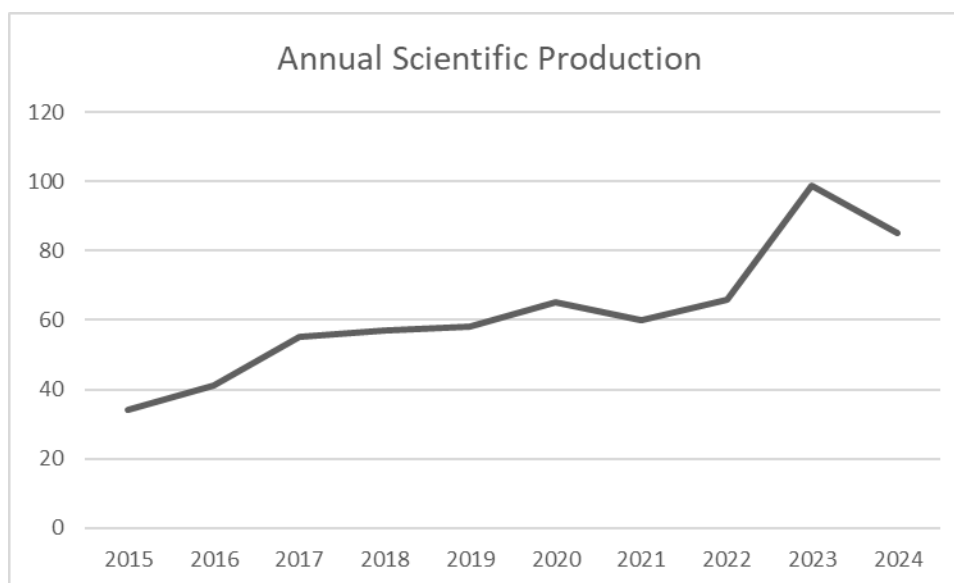


Figure 1: Annual Scientific Production

3.2 Most Cited Articles

Regarding the most cited articles in sustainable tourism research, at the top is Hall (2019), with a notable contribution that has received 441 citations. Higgins-Desbiolles follows with two key articles, from 2020 and 2018, accruing 306 and 305 citations, respectively. Ruhanen et al. (2015) study has 297 citations, reflecting sustained relevance in the academic discourse. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023) publication has garnered 252 citations, underscoring its importance in recent scholarly work. Sobaih et al. (2021) paper accumulated 213 citations. Other notable authors include Boley et al. (2017) (212 citations), Nepal et al. (2019) (206 citations), and Agyeiwaah et al. (2017) (181 citations), each addressing critical aspects of sustainable tourism such as environmental impact, community involvement, and policy implications. The list also highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the research, with contributions from Carr et al. (2016) (173 citations), Eslami et al. (2019) (172 citations), and Kim et al. (2019) (158 citations), who focus on indigenous perspectives, community attachment, and intangible cultural heritage, respectively. Grilli et al. (2021) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017) (with another significant paper from 2017) continue the discussion with works that have accumulated 157 and 137 citations. Finally, Cheung & Li (2019) and Guaita Martínez et al. (2019) round out the list with contributions focused on overtourism and rural tourism stability, receiving 134 and 131 citations, respectively. This compilation reflects the diverse and evolving research landscape within sustainable tourism, addressing various contemporary challenges and opportunities in the field.

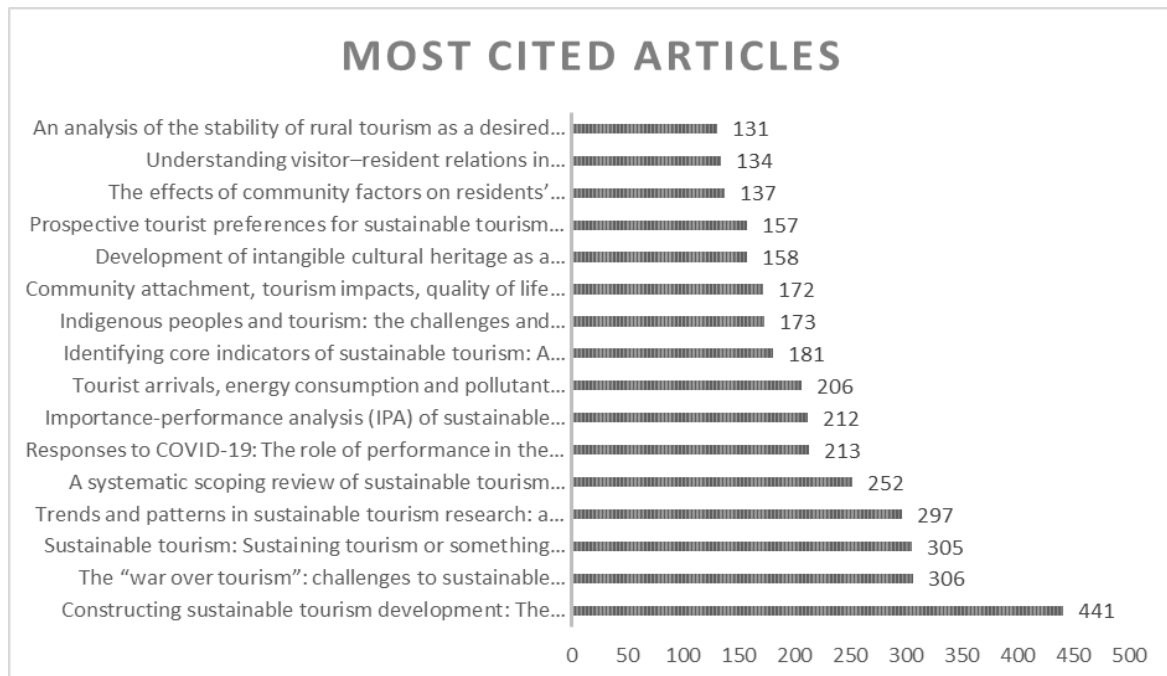


Figure 2: Most Cited Articles

3.3 Most Relevant Sources

The most relevant sources for publications in this field highlight the predominant academic journals contributing to the literature on tourism, sustainability, and hospitality. "Most relevant" refers specifically to sources with the highest number of publications, reflecting their prominent role in advancing research in this area. Leading the list is the Journal of Sustainable Tourism with 111 articles, reflecting its central role in disseminating research on sustainable tourism practices. The African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure follows with 25 articles, indicating its focus on the hospitality and tourism sectors in the African context. The Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism and Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes both contributed 21 articles each, emphasizing environmental management in tourism and hospitality-related themes, respectively. Tourism Planning and Development provided 20 articles, focusing on strategies and planning for tourism development, while Current Issues in Tourism contributed 19 articles, addressing contemporary challenges in the field. Other important sources include the Tourism Review with 17 articles, the Journal of Cleaner Production with 16 articles, and Tourism Recreation Research with 14 articles, the latter focusing on leisure and recreation in tourism. The Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, Tourism,

and Tourism Management all contributed 11 articles each, rounding out the list of key sources and emphasizing their regional and global perspectives on tourism management and development.

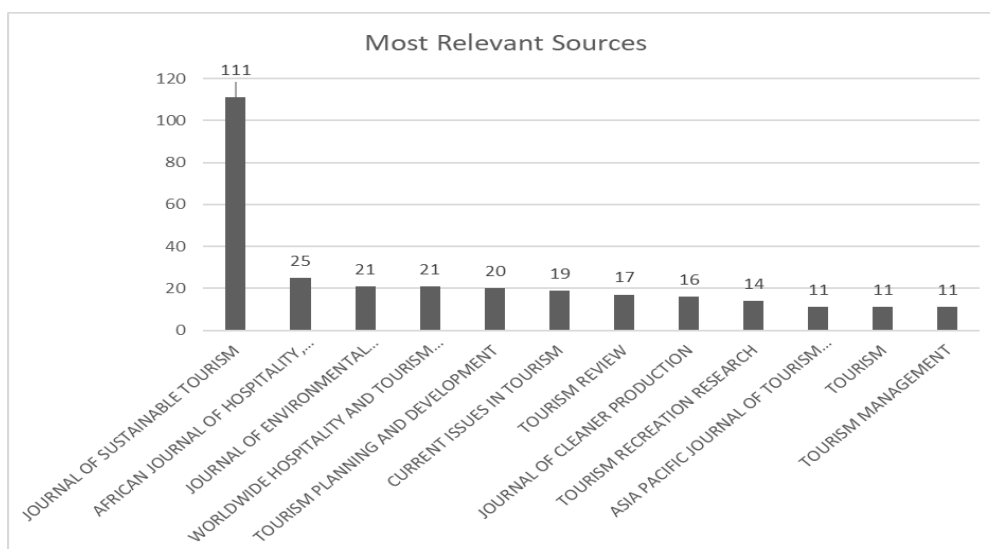


Figure 3: Most Relevant Sources

3.4 Most Relevant Authors

The most relevant authors contributing to the field are led by Font X, who has published 10 articles, making a significant impact on the body of literature. Following Font, Fuchs K, Hall CM, and Weaver D each have 6 articles, indicating their prominent roles in shaping ongoing research. Several authors, including Ruhanen L and Weaver DB, contributed 5 articles each, demonstrating consistent engagement in the field. Additionally, Dwyer L, Gautam V, Lesar L, Stojanović V, Wearing S, and Özgüt H have each published 4 articles, further enriching the research landscape. These authors represent a diverse set of perspectives and research focuses, collectively contributing to the growing body of knowledge in sustainable tourism, hospitality, and related disciplines.

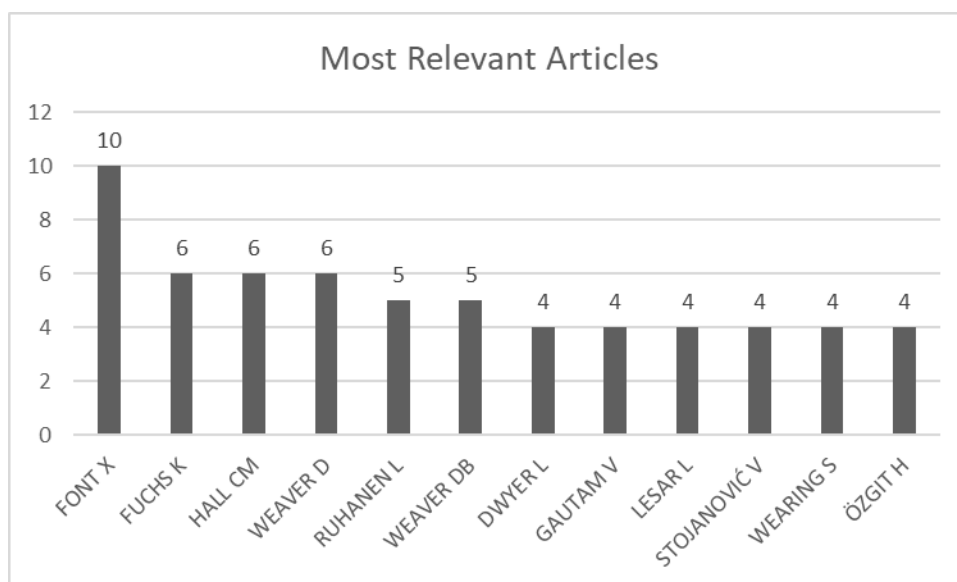


Figure 4: Most relevant authors

3.5 Thematic Evolution

The analysis of thematic evolution within the research field was conducted using author keywords, allowing for the exploration of the conceptual structure over time. The thematic progression between 2015 and 2024 reveals significant shifts in focus and the development of various research topics (as shown in Figure 5). From 2015 to 2019, the primary focus areas were "rural tourism", "sustainable tourism", "sustainability",

"stakeholder theory", "community participation", "place attachment", "tourism management", "business model", "certification", "authenticity" and "sustainable tourism development". These themes highlight the early emphasis on sustainability and its integration with tourism, particularly concerning environmental and economic aspects. In the subsequent period of 2020 to 2022, there was a noticeable expansion and evolution of topics. "Sustainable tourism" remained a central theme, as it was "sustainability", but they were accompanied by emerging topics such as "governance," "destination management," "development" and "case study". The "sustainable tourism development" continued to be a relevant theme. This period saw a shift toward more complex issues like governance structures and the management of tourism destinations, reflecting the maturing of sustainability research in tourism. Moving to the most recent period, 2023 to 2024, new themes emerged, including "protected areas", "biodiversity", "covid-19", "tourism impacts", "resilience", "environmental sustainability" and "sustainable tourism indicators". These topics indicate a growing interest in conservation and the role of protected areas in tourism, as well as an ongoing focus on sustainable development practices. This thematic evolution underscores the dynamic and expanding nature of research in sustainable tourism, with a clear shift from broad sustainability themes to more specific areas of interest such as governance, conservation, and biodiversity in the later stages. The development of these themes reflects the field's progression toward addressing complex environmental, social, and managerial challenges within the context of tourism.

In general, it is possible to see that the different themes have been evolving in a divergent but also convergent way. In particular, "sustainable tourism" investigated in 2015-2019 diverged in 2020-2022 into 3 distinct themes, "sustainable tourism", "governance", and "development", with the last two having their peak in 2020-2022. On the other hand, "community participation", "place attachment", "tourism management", "business model", "certification", and "authenticity" converged in 2020-2022, towards a broader topic of "sustainable tourism". In 2023-2024, greater specificity in research approaches is once again noted.

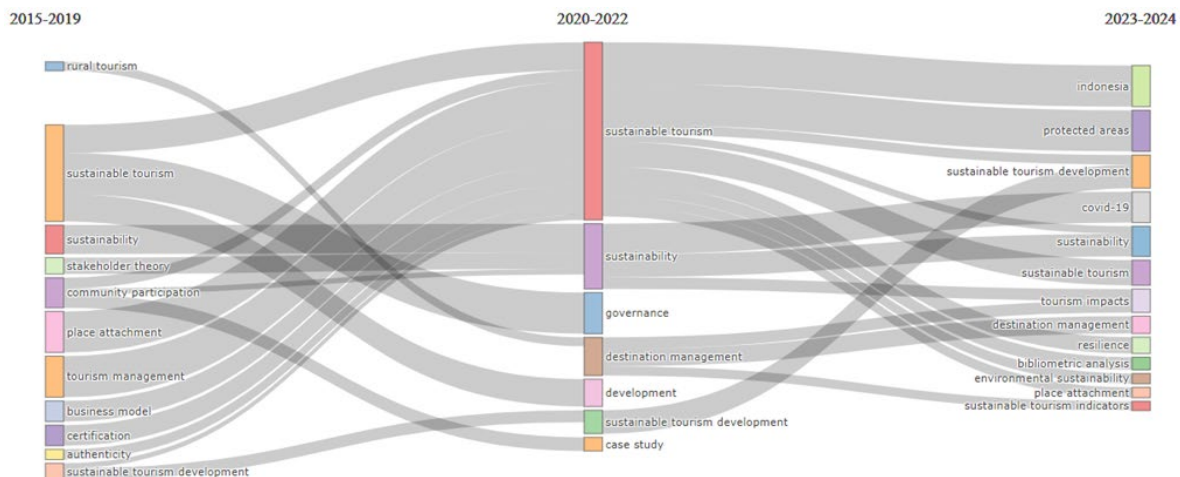


Figure 5: Thematic Evolution

The field of sustainable tourism presents significant potential for future investigations that address critical and complex issues. The following guidelines aim to enrich the understanding of the impacts and dynamics of tourism in different contexts.

One of the primary recommendations is to conduct studies that analyze cultural and geographical diversity, allowing for conclusions applicable to various locations and tourist profiles. These studies should encompass a broader range of cities and regions, incorporating the analysis of temporal trends, such as seasonality and market changes, to obtain a more comprehensive view of the factors affecting sustainability. Conducting primary field studies in diverse geographical and socioeconomic contexts is essential. Longitudinal studies that track initiatives over time would provide valuable information about the long-term outcomes of sustainable tourism practices.

Moreover, it is crucial to explore the relationship between tourists and the interactions between hosts and guests. This analysis could offer insights into how these relationships impact sustainable development. Additionally, investigating the tourist experience about the quality of life of host communities will enhance our understanding of the effects of visitors on local well-being.

The integration of advanced technologies, such as big data and artificial intelligence, is also a relevant directive. These tools can assist in understanding the attitudes and behaviours of residents and tourists, providing real-time data that can inform more adaptive policies. Evaluating the role of various entities in promoting sustainable tourism and investigating how local policies can influence the adoption of more responsible practices are areas that require attention.

Another aspect to consider is the analysis of specific thematic practices, such as gastronomic experiences and ecotourism, among others, to identify how factors such as reputation, environmental quality, and service quality influence tourists' choices regarding sustainable destinations. Studying the motivators of sustainable behaviours among both tourists and host communities is fundamental for fostering more responsible practices.

While post-COVID tourism continues to be a focus of research, an important challenge for the future will be to understand how residents perceive the changes brought about by tourism and, paradoxically, how these changes may limit their rights. The analysis of the phenomenon of over-tourism in historic cities should be deepened, as well as the investigation of how tourism policies affect the rights of residents in these contexts.

Interdisciplinary approaches that integrate urban planning, environmental sciences, and social sciences can offer a holistic view of the impact of tourism.

Lastly, the need to develop more precise metrics to measure the impact of sustainable tourism is evident. This includes conceptual analyses of existing indicators and the creation of new metrics. Recommendations for future research emphasize the importance of longitudinal and interdisciplinary approaches, the expansion of geographical context, the use of advanced technology, and data collection during periods of economic stability. These steps can not only provide a more complete understanding of tourism dynamics but also help shape practices that benefit both residents and the environment.

Furthermore, exploring the impact of contextual variables, such as cultural differences and the role of artificial intelligence, can significantly contribute to sustainability in tourism by optimizing processes and promoting responsible practices. The analysis of innovative and inclusive practices is essential for advancing truly sustainable tourism.

3.6 Theoretical Implications

This study advances the understanding of sustainable tourism by offering a review of research trends from the past decade, highlighting evolving themes and priorities within the field. This analysis reinforces the need for sustainable tourism frameworks to integrate multifaceted approaches, by synthesizing emerging topics such as governance, community involvement, and ecotourism, underscoring the importance of considering sustainability as a holistic concept rather than focusing on isolated dimensions. Additionally, the findings suggest that sustainable tourism strategies must continuously adapt to address new challenges and opportunities, including climate change and community resilience.

3.7 Practical Implications

The literature on sustainable tourism reveals several practical implications that can guide both research and practice in the field. Its main implications pertain to the development of effective policies; sustainable planning and management; education and awareness; the role of Innovation and technological adaptation in promoting sustainability; strengthening local communities; metrics and assessment of sustainability, and the promotion of sustainable destinations.

4. Conclusion

This literature review underscores the critical importance of sustainable tourism in addressing the environmental, social, and economic impacts of a rapidly growing global tourism sector. By analyzing research trends from 2015 to 2024, this study highlights the evolving focus areas and key themes in sustainable tourism. The data, sourced from 620 articles in the Scopus database, reveals a robust body of research that reflects both the progress and gaps within this field. The thematic evolution analysis provides insights for various stakeholders—academics, policymakers, industry leaders, and government agencies—by identifying current and emerging topics that can inform decision-making and shape future sustainable tourism strategies. These findings emphasize that the integration of sustainable practices is not only essential for the protection of natural ecosystems and local cultures but is also crucial for ensuring the long-term viability and appeal of tourist destinations. Ultimately, this study advocates for a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to

embedding sustainability at the core of tourism development. By fostering such efforts, sustainable tourism can contribute significantly to both local community well-being and the preservation of global resources, promoting a balanced, equitable future for the industry.

This study has certain limitations. First, the analysis was based solely on articles from Scopus. Although this database is recognized as one of the most extensive sources of peer-reviewed research, it is not the only available option. Additionally, the filtering process and use of analytical software may have led to the omission of some relevant literature. Alternative keywords might also have broadened the scope of the review. Based on these limitations, future research should consider expanding the analysis to include additional databases, such as Web of Science and EBSCO.

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